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One voice needed

The Environmental Protection Agency is about to hit 200 homes cleaned in the Libby area in the coming weeks and only 1,100 more to go.

Nearly three years ago, Gov. Judy Martz asked EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman to add Libby to the Superfund list using the state's only "silver bullet." Martz not only wanted a fast-track through the listing process but she wanted the cleanup to proceed quickly. She gave the EPA three years to clean the town so community leaders could hang out a sign that said "open for business."

Well community leaders haven't wanted to wait that long and they are working on various projects to bring people and business to town. In the long run, it could be for nothing if the community doesn't come together as one and lobby for adequate financial support for the ongoing Zonolite insulation cleanup.

Funding for the Libby project, the EPA's so-called top priority in the nation, is dwindling as the overall EPA annual budget stagnates. And that means a prolonged cleanup here in Libby.

How long? At present funding levels for the Libby cleanup, on-site coordinator Jim Christianson expects the cleanup to take another 8 or 9 years. If funding levels remain steady and do not continue to drop.

That's a far cry from what the governor wanted, and she will only be around herself for another year. New governor, new priorities.

Mike Cook, director of the EPA's Office of Emergency and Remedial Response, promised the cleanup would be completed in five or six years.

To accomplish that, Christianson said he needs \$19 million to \$21 million a year for house cleanups and not the \$15 million expected for 2004. That's minus \$2 million he needed last summer.

The House of Representatives has approved a fiscal year 2004 appropriation that leaves the EPA's overall spending at \$1.27 billion a year, the same as FY 2003. The Senate has yet to take up an appropriations bill that includes the EPA.

A recent study by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group says 42 percent of the Superfund cleanup efforts could be slowed or stopped as a result of the federal government failing to adequately fund the EPA's listed sites.

Christianson is disturbed by the budgetary trend and he's more disturbed by the lack of community cooperation to work together on this issue.

He said he found the division in Libby among people interested in asbestos issues and economic development to be troubling. Everyone wins by getting the cleanup done, he said.

A lingering cleanup would be counter-productive to any economic developments we're presently pursuing. It could pay handsomely for the community to truly work together on seeking more funding.

Christianson recommended support from the city, county and groups and individuals.

Of course, we didn't have that when Gov. Martz made her pre-Christmas day speech here in Libby nearly three years ago. The county and the school district were the only political entities to stand up and request the "silver bullet" and the listing. — Roger Morris